

From Pre-modern to Modern History in China, Japan, and Korea and the Implications for 21st Century Northeast Asia

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Transition from the pre-modern to the modern period in Northeast Asia exhibited a somewhat different dynamic compared with other regions. While Korea, Japan, and China share commonality with other periphery countries that encountered modernity shortly after opening their ports, each experienced internal revolutions, reforms, and uprisings in the manner of Europe and America. Thus, the internally triggered response to western-style modernity in these three countries during the transition era cannot be ignored.

Another distinctive point, furthermore, is that East Asian countries engaged in regional wars beginning in the late 19th century until 1945. Although Russia played a role until 1905, following the Russo-Japanese war, the main regional actors became the countries therein. The primary causes for such wars were generally the desire for regional hegemony and to contain the expansion of other powers.

This paper attempts to analyze how the unique manner of transition to modernity in East Asia resulted in a specific type of international order. Therein, it also examines internal and external “otherization” in Northeast Asia since the late 19th century. At the same time it tries to analyze differences between Korea/China and Japan with respect to identity formation and the dual perceptions of each country.

Keywords: The First Sino-Japanese War, The Russo-Japanese War, Modernization reform in Northeast Asia, Nation-state building in Northeast Asia, Otherization

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I. Introduction

There were diverse events and issues in the transition from the pre-modern to the modern period in world history. In Europe, the transition was triggered by the industrial revolution, while America and France experienced a civil war and bourgeois revolution. Meanwhile, Russia underwent proletarian revolution in the first half of the 20th century. The characteristic shared in common by these countries, however, was the achievement of transition to modern society via internal events.

Most developing countries underwent transition under colonial rulers. The modern capitalist system took form amid penetration by the international market under the auspices of empire. Since modernity emanated from “core countries” to “periphery countries” not only in economic but also in cultural terms, however, the legacy of colonialism continued to operate even after emancipation from empire in the post 1945 era.

A somewhat different dynamic is apparent in East Asia. While Korea, Japan, and China share commonality with other periphery countries that encountered modernity shortly after opening their ports,

each experienced internal revolutions, reforms, and uprisings in the manner of Europe and America. Thus, the internally triggered response to western-style modernity in these three countries during the transition era cannot be ignored.

Another distinctive point, furthermore, is that East Asian countries engaged in regional wars beginning in the late 19th century until 1945. Although Russia played a role until 1905, following the Russo-Japanese war, the main regional actors became the countries therein. The primary causes for such wars were generally the desire for regional hegemony and to contain the expansion of other powers.¹

This paper attempts to analyze how the unique manner of transition to modernity in East Asia resulted in a specific type of international order. Therein, it also examines internal and external “otherization”² in Northeast Asia since the late 19th century.

II. Wars in the Great Transition Period

The opening of East Asian ports was forcefully carried out via external military pressure. In China, there was the Opium War, in Japan, America’s black ship, and in Korea, the Japanese gunboat Unyo. This was a process quite similar to what occurred in other developing countries in world history.

At the same time, the three countries faced very serious internal strife at the moment of opening. The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom Rebellion (1851) in China, the Atsuma Rebellion (*Seinan* War, 1877) in Japan, and the Eastern Learning (*Donghak*) Peasant Uprising (1894) in

¹ Many scholars pay attention to the changes and events during the transition period. However, there are few works comprehensively analyzing the features of the three Northeast Asian countries at the same time.

² Neuman (1999) analyzed the European identity through the exclusion of the East and the discourse on Turkey and Russia.

Korea were internal conflicts caused by the need for change in social structure. In particular, people in China and Korea desired social change as a means of rescue from a predatory state. As in France and Russia, peasants and intellectuals who had been discriminated against sought a way to change the prevailing social structure.

This resulted in movements to reform the domestic system to suit the transitioning international order. In Korea, the enlightenment group emerged in the mid-19th century, which succeeded the Northern Learning group of the late 18th century. In Japan, Yoshida Shoin, from Choshu, played a pioneering role training new leaders for the Meiji Restoration. Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao in China were key intellectuals involved in the Hundred Day's Reform in the late 1890s, which succeeded the Self-Strengthening Movement of 1860s Beijing.

Although the Meiji reformers' group had originated in the Sonno Joi (Revere the Emperor, Expel the Barbarians) group, they overthrew the Tokugawa Bakufu and initiated top-down reform under the Denno in Japan. In Korea, encouraged by Japan, the radical enlightenment group implemented a coup in 1884 in an effort to reform political and social institutions. Without financial or military backing, however, the attempt fell apart within three days. Nonetheless, moderate reformers later initiated the Gabo Reforms (1894-1895), which abolished the traditional hierarchy system and established a modern administrative system.

On the other hand, reactions from conservative groups could not be ignored during the transition period in all three countries. These groups desired to maintain the old system in order to protect their own interests and fomented a great deal of political strife toward impeding modern style reforms. Northeast Asia featured three dynasties enjoying more than 200 years of longevity, underpinning deeply entrenched ruling classes with vested interests in the old system.³ While it is argued that identity

³ In particular, the Joseon Dynasty in Korea was established in 1392 and subsisted without any

had already taken form in East Asia in the pre-modern period in terms of “ethnicity,” the formation of collective identity transcending class was difficult under conditions in which the class system yet persisted (Haboush 2016).

As a result, conflicts arose between reformists and conservatives in Northeast Asia. With no decisive winner emerging, “otherization” occurred between both groups. This stalemate would extend into the early 20th century in Korea and China, though consensus around reform was eventually reached in Japan.

One important characteristic differentiating the experience of these three countries from that of Europe, however, is related to the foundation of the modern nation state. This was not achieved through internal modern reforms but by regional wars among the three countries as well with Russia. In particular, the First Sino-Japanese War played a crucial role with respect to nation-state building in East Asia.

The initial impact of the war was felt in China, who was defeated by Japan. Chinese intellectuals fixated on the ramifications of this loss for the formation of a Chinese national identity, since Japan was a much smaller, former tributary state. The Japanese injured Chinese confidence and self-respect, and many finally acknowledged the necessity of implementing modern reforms and establishing a modern nation state. China was the latest among the three countries to reach this realization, although it had been the first to open its ports. Of course, identity was no simple issue among Chinese people due to the varied composition of ethnic groups. At that time, Qing China’s leaders were not even of the majority ethnicity.⁴

serious change until 1910, despite disastrous wars in 1592 with Japan and in 1636 with the Manchurians who founded Qing China.

⁴ In this regard, there is a very interesting exhibit in the First Sino-Japanese War museum located in Weihai, Shantung Province. Among the historical remains, Kang Youwei’s calligraphy is particularly notable. He wrote that the “nation” in China emerged after the war. Majority Han Chinese people, in the end, discovered their national identity even under a minority regime

Japan's modern nation state was strengthened through wars against China, Russia and the US. In particular, the Triple Intervention in 1895 and the Russo Japanese War played a role in galvanizing nationalism through otherization of the Western World.⁵ Especially, wars with China and Russia allowed Japan entry into the "rich countries' club" in the early 20th century and to colonize Taiwan and Korea.

Similar with the Chinese experience, the Korean people first came to discover the nation amid an externally provoked crisis in the late 19th and early 20th century. While the first watershed occurred with the signing of the Treaty of Shimonoseki, which defined Korea as an independent country separate from the Sinic sphere, the assassination of Queen Min in 1895 and the Japan-Korea Protectorate Treaty in 1905 provided two more occasions for strengthening national identity through antagonism toward Japan (Schmid 2002). In particular, the latter two events triggered the formation of the voluntary righteous army resisting the Japanese and the exile of intellectuals and former bureaucrats opposing Japanese power.⁶

Thus, with respect to these three East Asian cases, wars within the region displayed a much more decisive impact on the formation of the nation state amid the transition to modernity than internal modernization reforms. Furthermore, Korea and China experienced other significant externally provoked events in the annexation of Korea by Japan in 1910 and the Manchurian Incident in China in 1931. As well, the total war

through hostility to Japan.

⁵ Japanese leaders conceded due to the Triple Intervention and then realized the necessity to contain Russian power in Northeast Asia for the survival of Japan. Shortly after the Portsmouth Treaty in 1905, Japanese people engaged in a demonstration to acquire more compensation from Russia. These Two events facilitated the integration of Japanese society, allowing the Japanese to discover the "nation" known as Japan (Wells and Wilson 1999).

⁶ The Assassination of Ito Hirobumi was an act of resistance against Japan. Interestingly enough, however, the assassin Ahn Jung Geun argued for the necessity of a Northeast Asian community to contain Russian expansionism (Ahn 2010).

system beginning in 1937 functioned as an important impetus for nation-state building in Japan. For Korea and China, Japan was the “other”; for Japan, it was the West.

Of course, wars served to accelerate internal conflict and otherization, with some groups supporting the Japanese project to build a pan-Asian empire. This undertaking was legitimized by the argument that Japan should expel all Western powers to protect Asia and initiate Asian-style modernization. The emergence of pro-Japanese-imperialism groups created serious internal strife between pro- and anti-Japanese groups, which has subsisted even subsequent to Japanese surrender and departure from Korea and Taiwan in 1945.⁷

III. The Double Perception of Others

The fact that regional and civil wars accompanied the process of modern nation-state formation since the late 19th century means that hostility and otherization have been internalized in Korea, Japan and China. This sentiment has made it difficult to build normal diplomatic relationship in East Asia.

Otherization amid the process of identity formation in East Asia, moreover, was not without its own complications. The main psychological structure in East Asia rests on the perception of the victimized (Korea and China) and victimizing (Japan).⁸ This Japan, an “other” from the Korean and Chinese perspective, exists in stark contrast

⁷ The Tokyo court did not provide any solution in terms of reinterpreting the Japanese militarist argument advanced during the Asia Pacific War. As a result, a similar argument reemerged in Japan in the post-1945 period, which has been the cause of history textbook disputes in Northeast Asia.

⁸ Chinese protests against Japanese militarists constitute the content and subjects of most Chinese dramas on public television. As well, the recently released Korean film “Assassination” (*Amsal*), which depicts resistance against the Japanese Empire during the colonial period, was seen by more than ten million Koreans, or about one-fifth of the entire population.

with the one that has been the exemplary model of Asian-style modernization and a unique member of the clique of wealthy nations.

According to research on the South Korean mass media, there are two extremely different tones (Park 2006). On the one hand, Japan is a country responsible for war crimes in the Asia Pacific War. Issues with regard to sexual slavery and conscription under the total war system contribute to a very negative image of Japan. In particular, whenever territorial issues arise, this negative perception of Japan flares up in Korean society.

During the transition to modernity in Northeast Asia, young intellectuals considered Japan an ideal model for their countries' futures. Leaders in Korea and China attempted to benchmark Japanese modernization and self-strengthening since Japan was the only model in the region and was an Asian country whose conditions and history were similar. Since they believed that the East Asian system and values were very different from those of the West, Japan sufficed as an appropriate model to follow. Many leading and pioneering intellectuals and political figures studied in Japan and learned this Japanese system and values.⁹ In this sense, there is a double standard at work in the manner in which China and Korea see Japan.

This double standard is also palpable in the hostility of Korean civil society toward those who collaborated with the colonial Japanese regime. Korean society prefers to refer to collaborators not as war criminals who supported Japan's unjust war, but as pro-Japanese, or national traitors. The term "pro-Japanese" fully connotes a sense of national betrayal, while "pro-Chinese" and "pro-American" are rarely mentioned. The pro-Japanese issue is prevalent even today owing to the failure to punish

⁹ Some young leaders came to believe in communism rather than the Japanese system during their study in Japan. Thus, famous Korean communist leaders in the initial communist movement imported communism not from Russia, but from Japan (Suh 1967).

collaborators following emancipation from Japan.¹⁰ In spite of normalization in 1965 (Korea and Japan) and in 1972 (China and Japan), this kind of complex perception regarding Japan is still operational.

At the same time, some scholars try to reevaluate the collaborators not as criminals but as pioneers endeavoring to modernize Korea before and during the colonial period. This interpretation is very similar to that of the Japanese militarists' wishing to legitimize their rule over the colonies before 1945.¹¹ Naturally, it is the cause of much social strife and disputes. Meanwhile, Taiwanese people have been nostalgic toward the colonial period, wherein Taiwan achieved historically high levels of economic growth.

Another significant point is that, for Korea and Japan, China is an expansionist country attempting to establish hegemony over neighboring countries and the region. The perceived threat from China has existed since the ancient period in East Asia. This is revealed by the Chinese attacks on Goguryeo (7th century), Goryeo and Japan (12th century), and Joseon (17th century). As well, Koreans particularly recall the tributary system with the Chinese Empire before 1895. Whereas Chinese dynasties rarely intervened in internal political affairs in Korea under the system, the few instances in which it did are frequently revived in Korean dramas and cinemas even these days.¹² This has also been a rationale for the US containment policy in Asia since the Korean War, through the Vietnam War, and even now. The maintenance of the US-Japan and US-Korea

¹⁰ The South Korean mass media has dealt with the pro-Japanese issue on National Independence Day every year since democratization in 1987. Before democratization, the pro-Japanese issue was a kind of taboo because several Korean leaders including Park Chung Hee and Choi Kyu-Ha were educated at a Japanese school located in Manchuria during the colonial period. In the 2012 presidential election, the pro-Japanese issue gained widespread coverage in the media since a nominee was the daughter of former president Park Chung Hee.

¹¹ Most works by American scholars that focus on the colonial period display a very similar trend and are strongly critical of Korean scholars. *Colonial Modernity in Korea* by Robinson and Shin (2001) is a work representative of this tendency.

¹² For example, see "Masquerade [*Gwanghae: wangi doen namja*]" (2012).

alliances entailing the presence of US forces in both countries, even after collapse of the Cold War system, has been made possible due to the perceived Chinese threat.

IV. Nation Building as a Result of Wars

One more critical issue in Northeast Asia is that Korea and China underwent internal processes of nation building in the form of civil wars. Identity in China and Korea has been twofold, with nationalists in Taiwan and communists in Mainland China and the existence of two Koreas materializing during the Korean War. Even though Chinese society was divided by two different ideologies before the Japanese surrender, the civil war between 1945 and 1949 deepened antagonism among Chinese people.¹³ The continuing civil war during the Cold War provided another opportunity for nation building through antagonism and otherization vis-à-vis two internal hostile groups. Therein, the Chinese case is even more complex due to the conflict between native Taiwanese and Mainland Chinese in Taiwan since 1949.

Before the Korean War, Korean people had not internalized a particular affiliation with the South or the North in spite of the separate governments established two years prior. During the war, Korean people realized they had an enemy from a different part of the Korean Peninsula. Thus, the terminology of “South” and “North Korea” entered into widespread use beginning amid the war (Park 2002). Since the armistice agreement in 1953, which put a temporary halt to hostility, South Koreans prefer to refer to themselves with the term “*Hangugin*,” while North Koreans use the term “*Joseon saram*.”¹⁴

¹³ More than 14 thousand Chinese POWs refused to be repatriated to Mainland China. Instead they chose Taiwan (Park 2005).

¹⁴ China and Japan use similar terms for the two countries even nowadays. South Korea is known as Hanguk and North Korea is known as Joseon in China. South Korea is Hanguk and North

Of course, Japan also underwent an internal process of nation building through wars spanning the late 19th century to 1945. However, this was a process characterized not by internal antagonism, but the otherization of the external world. Beginning with the Meiji Restoration, this otherization encompassed not only the Western world but also other Asian countries like Korea and China. Fukuzawa Yukichi's well known slogan, "Leave Asia, Join Europe" (*Datsuanyūō*, 脱亞入歐), effectively conveys the features of otherization in Japan (Hirayama 2004).

Considering the history of the transition to modernity in Korea and China, it appears as if double otherization emerged; otherization internally via civil wars and externally via wars. Both encouraged hostility within each society as well as within the region.

This double otherization process has caused several problems in East Asia. First, the influence of internal politics on international relations in the region is strong. Despite the fact that foreign policy should be considered with respect to national interest, foreign policies in Northeast Asian countries are heavily dictated by the vicissitudes of domestic politics, which means a two-level game is excessively at work.¹⁵

On the other hand, conflicts in international politics have contributed to the integration of domestic society and assuaging anti-government sentiment in the three countries. Anti-Japanese sentiment operates in Korea and China, while fear of China is at work in Japan and Korea. The South Korean and Japanese governments utilize anti-communism, just as the North Korean and Chinese governments do anti-Americanism. Though the hostility to other countries derives from Northeast Asian history, it is utilized politically in each society.¹⁶

Korea is Kita Joseon in Japan.

¹⁵ See Putnam (1988).

¹⁶ Recently Anti-Korea sentiment rose in Japan, which was discouraged by a law issued by the Japanese Diet in 2016 (http://news.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2016/05/25/2016052500374).

In sum, a hostile atmosphere has continued to exist domestically and regionally since the transition to modernity. Antagonism in each society has been deeply engrained and complex since the late 19th century in Northeast Asia. This kind of double hostility makes it very difficult to foster cooperative relationships in the region. Conflicts between East Asian countries in international organizations as well as within the region are due to such sentiments and perceptions. Even major foreign policies have been heavily politicized since the 19th century.

It is not difficult to detect this phenomenon in the history textbooks of the three countries. Each country stresses the other countries' wrongdoings, while very reluctant to point out its own errors and crimes. Some textbooks written by extreme conservatives even try to rationalize Japan's unjust invasion and expansionism. Naturally, such extremists are strongly offended by those textbooks espousing introspection regarding the lessons of past errors.

V. Conclusion

As mentioned above, mutual hostility in East Asia has contributed the formation of national identity and the nation state. Such sentiment has played a very critical role in strengthening identity domestically.

Due to this condition, politicians in each country sometimes try to utilize hostile sentiment for political gain. While cooperative gestures contribute to the popularity of politicians on the one hand, aggressive policies and rhetoric work more effectively among the public. Under authoritarianism, this phenomenon occurred frequently. For example, anti-Japanese slogans were the most important means of agitating and mobilizing the people during the Rhee Syng-man government in South Korea.¹⁷ It was impossible to normalize relations with Japan under such

html, accessed on June 25th, 2016).

conditions, even though the US strongly encouraged the two governments to do so as soon as possible.

North Korea is another such case. Anti-Japanese sentiment, combined with anti-Americanism, is the most important tool to legitimize the regime, as its founder, Kim Il-sung, had a career as a guerrilla leader resisting Japan before 1945. The North Korean regime invented new terminology based on Kim's story, such as the "Anti-Japan guerrilla style campaign" (Armstrong 2015).

Consensus regarding the threat posed by China allows Japan to more easily strengthen its alliance with the US, even though the US destroyed major cities and used atomic bombs in Japan during World War II. The US-Japan alliance has been a crucial means for the US to involve itself in Northeast Asian affairs since 1945. It has also played a role in escalating tension between China and Japan excepting the period of détente in the 1970s. Under such conditions, Japan believes it is safe from China under the American nuclear umbrella, as is the case in South Korea. Meanwhile, it is impossible for the three countries to reach a consensus on the North Korean nuclear issue.

In addition, perceptions with respect to the varying statuses of the three countries in the early 20th century, as an Empire and core country, as a colony, and as a victim of invasion, have made it difficult to create consensus regarding historiography within the region. This fact precludes the possibility of publishing and using mutually acceptable history textbooks, and thus disputes in this regard occur frequently in East Asia.

¹⁷ On the one hand, Rhee was consistently critical of Japanese policy during the colonial period. However, simultaneously he expressed a very positive evaluation of the Japanese Prime Minister, who had been a minister in Manchukoku before 1945 and designated a Class A war criminal in the Tokyo Court in 1946 (Park 2010).

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